

## [E. J. and Mattie Marshall]

26040

February 15, 1939

[E?]. J. and Mattie Marshall (Negro)

Alabama and Maryland Streets

Plant City, Florida

Overseer of Tenants

Paul Diggs, writer (Negro)

[Veronica E.?] [?] and Evelyn [Werner?], revisers.

[E?]. J. AND Mattie Marshall, OVERSEER OF TENANTS

[E?]. J. and Mattie Marshall lived in a two-story house at the corner of Alabama and Maryland Streets in Cork, a suburb of Plant City, Florida. A granddaughter, [Eddie?] Mercedes Marshall lives with them. Their six-room home is constructed of unpainted weatherboard and has a shingle roof, mossy with age. Outside, next to a dilapidated car shed where farm implements are stored, is a shack which houses E. J's mule, Beck.

At one end of the front porch is a pile of cut wood covered with a granny sack, a bushel basket, a sack of corn, and a cloth bag that hangs on the wall by the door. At the other end is an old table with a water bucket and a few pots and pans on it. Buckets of flowers are ranged against the wall. On the side porch are four wash tubs which serve the alternate purpose of wash tub and bath tub.

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The lawn needs trimming, and the yard is full of overgrown shrubbery. Toward the rear of the lot, I see two large cane bushes which are taller than the house; these supply the Marshall's and their neighbors with fishing poles.

Mattie and [E?]. J. are both on the porch when I come up. [E?]. J. is checking his books. He is an overseer who leases land for the Swift Company, to tenant farmers and does some farming for himself. He wears a tan straw hat with holes in it to keep his head cool. His shirt is dark gray and his trousers blue, bright yellow suspenders hold up the latter. Dangling from a trouser pocket to his watch pocket is a ponderous gold chain. His shoes are heavy [brogans?].

He politely invites me to come up on the porch, where he introduces me to his wife Mattie. Her complexion is much lighter than his and she has straight black hair. She greets me pleasantly and keeps looking at me over the edge of her glasses which she wears far down on her nose. She has a clean white apron over her red and white dotted gingham, and bedroom slippers on her feet: "They's for comfort," she says apologetically.

I no sooner seat myself when two white men drive up in a new Ford. [E?]. J. greets them heartily and excuses himself saying. "[Thet?] oldest man has charge of the Swift Company's bizness. He's come for all the money what I've collected on the leases. "I controls 150 acres here. These is leased to 21 tenants. The 'mount of lan let out to each tenant, ranges from 1 to 20 acres, all accordin to the number of acres he can farm. Now and agin one of them tries his bestus to beat us outten some money by runnin away at the end of the season. We charges them aroun \$15 a year for one acre."

While [E?]. J. goes down to talk with the men, Mattie shows me her home and I ask her where she comes from. "I was borned in Tamper, Florida most 62 years ago. My folks was Josh and 'Lizabeth Bolton. I had six sisters and six brudders, eight of them is still alivin. They's all in South Caroliney, ceptin one sis what lives in Tamper.

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"I was de fifth chile in the fambly. As fer school, well, I went plum through de ninth grade. I has one chile, Josie Loe Johnson. Her man operates a bisness on Laura Street."

While we chat we go through the house. The clean kitchen, with its linoleum covered floor comes first. There is a large cook stove, two small tables with oilcloth covers, and an old clothes closet where the dishes are 3 kept. Next to the kitchen was a pantry room where odds and ends are stored.

In the good-sized middle room, which is sometimes used as a dining room, there is a large table near the steps leading to the second floor, a china closet and a silent clock. An old-fashioned clothes tree is laden with hats, coats and other articles of wearing apparel. The walls of the room are covered with pictures, and a framed print of the Ten Commandments. The front room is clean and well furnished.

By this time [E?]. J. is almost through, so Mattie and I sit down to wait. She has already told me that the five-acre tract across the road from them is owned by Mack Wodsworth, a Negro who also has a business on Laura Street.

I watch the Negroes picking strawberries in the Wodsworth field across the road. They are talking and laughing. One is heard complaining: "[Nothing—?] aint doing nothin!" Another adds: "No siree, ain't doing a God's thing." A foreman walks up and down the rows, his tray in hand, picking up the baskets of berries as quickly as they are filled. At the far side of the field there is a large building constructed of galvanized shooting, where the berries are being graded and packed.

[E?]. J. returns to the porch, settles himself in a cane bottom chair and when i tell him what I want, comments[?] "This will shore carry my way back yonder."

"I was borned in Edgefield, South Caroliney, November 16, 1869. My ma and pa was Howard and Frances Marshall; they's daid now. They were slaves. Their master, his name

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was '[Crafts?],' and his was considered aristocrat folks. They was well known in South Caroliney.

My pa brought \$30,000 from Newberry to Aiken, South Caroliney fer them one time. It was to pay fer a large plantation what the Crafts boughten.

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Now, you see, that's whar I gits my tradin abilities, it's from my pa.

"I was married to my first wife, Nellie I. Jiles, a long time ago, she has been daid most 40 year now. She's the mama to my two childrens. Raymond, my son, he has been in the postal service in New York City for 14 year. Then my gal Bessie Lydia Brown lives with her husband. He's an undertaker down to Live Oak, Florida. They have two fine childrens.

"None of my younguns has ever given me trouble. The boy looks jest like me too! Its nice when you got children what grows up to do well.

"I married Mattie, my second wife in Tamper, and brung her here neigh onto 38 years go."

At this Mattie blurts out sarocastically: "And thet is shore one long time to live in one place, believe-you-me!"

Ignoring her, [E?]. J. continues: "I come to Alachua, Florida, from South Caroliney, and worked for the Western Union Telegraph Company. They larn me the trade as electrician. I was young then. I also had the distinction of being promoted in less time than any man on the job. In three months I come from apprentice to line repairman. At that there time, we was stationed at Walda, Florida. Later I came to Tamper, to do electric work. I lived in Hillsborough County around 43 years, right between Tamper and Plant City. I will be alivin here 38 year this coming January.

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"I put the first electric light system here in Plant City. I larn to telegraph, too. Oncet I got up a conversation with my boss-man, Mr. George E. Harris, over to Jacksonville, over the telegraph.

"This was shore some place when I first came here. On Laura Street at times we could wade in water what was knee high to waist deep for about two blocks. This was shore low country then. You could go afishin and row 5 boats in many a spot aroun here. Yes sir! You shore could. All out aroun here was just dense woods. Oh! What a wonnerful rev-o-lyn-tion. My goodness alive! A wonnerful improvement. Why there here place warn't no more than a wilderness.

"I was the first man what had a deed to a home in Lincoln Park, for that was it's name when I first come here. The track of lan you soo right in front of yew eyes now is name for me. It's call 'Marshall Heights.'

When I first come to Plant City there was very few colored folks here. Now the Negroes is just about half. There is heaps more livin outside the city limits. I moved into this here house in 1910.

The strawberry business ain't no small business. The cost of a nursery is from \$20 to \$25 an acre. I got eight acres under cultivation now. See that nice tractor over yonder in the field? Thet's mine. The colored man runnin it is a fine Christian hearted feller, and he's reliable too.

"Some of the tenants [makes?] money here and some don't. We lets them [lives?] their own lives. They raise other things besides strawberries, too. Some practically feeds theirselves ofen the lan. The \$15 what they has to pay for the use of the lan is too much, but that's the boss' price, so what kin I do about it?

"Jest one thing that worries me about this farmin, and thet's the differences in prices fer our goods. They gives us colored farmers one price for our food, when the market is

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calling for another. I'm thinkin of mergin with a big grower from Norfolk, Virginey, way. Thet's the place where they builds ships, ain't it. We kin raise stuff here and sell it at a greater profit. If you don't sell enough trough the cooperative, and attempt to ship independent, the wise birds here wires ahead of your shipment, then 6 When the shipment reaches it destination, they dumps yours. Thet is, we doan get no price for it. [Thet's?] what us poor feller is up again.

"I [dcan?] claim to have no education. I [?] made good contacts by [?] and [?] good man and woman so far. I only had four years of schoolin. Thet ain't much is it? Right now I takes four newspapers and some agricultural magazine. I been taking the Tamper Tribune for nearly 40 years."

Mattie sighs, "I kin remember when the Tamper Tribune started nearly 40 years ago in Tamper. [Dr.?] [Stovall?] was the first printer and he started in an old house on Franklin Street. [We?] also [reads?] the Pittsburgh Carrier."

[E?]. J. [?] "I'se been on the trustee board, but the colored members [wringle?] so, 'till the white folks cuts them out. [?] the board consults me. They takes my word [whenever?] any matters comes up. Sometimes they calls me on the phone, and that is all there is to it. I'so responsible for thet new school building [what?] they got over yonder. One day I thought that them colored boys and girls [?] needin a new play grown, and was I stunn when I finds out they done went and fix it up. Honest, Doc, I jest couldn't go on and do things unless I knowed I was livin right."

[E?]. J.'s stepdaughter rides up in a green Chevrolet car, [E?]. J. says: "That's my car, and it's a fast stepper too. I hardly ever drives it, though, I just leaves it for the childrens to enjoy themselves. Jest give me my old friend [Book?], we make good time up and down the rows. Thet's fast enough for me. You gets somethin out of thet. Make thet thing out [?], it takes most everything you can rake and scrape to keep it up. This [worle?] is movin too fast for [me?] Look at my house! It needs repairin right now and a paintin. The

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money I waste on that car would do it, too. It's time folks was usin some judgement, [but?] everbody wants to keep up with the 7 style. And you ain't in style these days unless you has a bronze casket when you die. That's plain [nonsense?].

“Me I doan keep up with no polytics. I ain't voted atall in the last few years. I quit foolin with it, I get disgusted. I always voted Republican when I done my votin. But if I do it again I'se gonna vote Democrat. That lily white mess disgusted me with the Republicans. I'se also would vote for the mans who is doin the peoples the mostest good. What we want is a man who will do what he says, and for the good of all, an not jest the party.

“Since I'se been afarmin I'se [lost flesh?], but it's done me good and builded me up in health. My folks health has been purty good as a whole. [Nothin?] beats outdoor work. Some tells me to exercise like the boys what plays baseball and other games, but that's plum fools advise. I takes mine in the garden with old [Book?], cause you kin git somethin out of thet.

“I think in another year I might go to raisin livestock, I think I kin make a go at it. Yeh, and there's good money in it, too, in fact I was once a cattleman. That's a life fer a family—fresh eggs and butter. [Too?] I [nootar?] have a horse to ride, [se'ens?] I could roam up them cattle. That's fine, I shore must like cattle the way I keep talkin about them.

[“Oncet?] I had money and was fixed purty good in this town. Since the depression [camed?] things has went haywire. I give up road business about sight year ago.

“I tried to be a trader all my life, but it's kinda difficult like to figger my income. I [useter own] lots of property, I sold that. Like taxes has been [duvin?] the last several year, I hadda git rid of it. But I realise a purty fair living from my tenants, you know my share after I settles with 8 the [boss-man?]. Courtin evertin, though, I reckons I makes aroun \$1,500 a year. That ain't all [gravey?] neither.

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"To make money or do anything else, it pays to git yorsolf on the Lord's side. I tries to keep on his side. I'se a member of the Allen Chapel [?] Church. Our paster is the Rev. Cooper. I belongs to the church from [way?] back yonders. Spent me lifetime [comin?] right up in it. I'so contributed to churches all my life. No, I don't goes to church so often as I should now. When you gits older you [sees?] so much you slows down a little. You'll git that way some day. I kin see yor full of pep now jest from the many things you done ask me. But I sees a little different.

"Besides, the spirit [cristin?] with the ministers tends to lend to the [Caeser bizness?]. The ranks and files ain't regarded, [unless?] you pay as you go. You is a good [man?] ifen you has money, but doen go to church without it, unless you does wants be made shame. I kin go an lay down a dollar and they calls my name so loud you in hear it plum around the block. But that nickle-[man?] you hardly knows he dropped in airy thing. He hardly gits a thank you. That's what I means when I talks about that [Caesar?] bizness.

"You bet I likes good things to eat! We has [wint?] we wants aroun here. I gets most of my food [outton?] the soil, but what's better? I loves good old corn bread, an believe me I shore got someone who know how to cook it, too. Wha that's half yor life!"

Mattie poors over her glasses and grins broadly.

"I also likes corn, peas, greens, beefstew, beefsteak, tatars, rice, chicken and eggs. [We?] has a fine flock of White Rock chickens and I'se tryin to git a new strain of them from Knoxville, Tennessee. I has some hens now what weighs from five to seven pound. I also furnishes the teacher 9 of the Home Economics Class at our school with chickens. Sometime the class come over here and makes a study of them. Then I goes out and gives them younguns a talkin to. I'se been able to bring out many fine pints that the teacher ain't knowed. You see you gotter put practical applications with theory. You know, that's like the rabbit what was throwed in the briar patch. He looked up and jest grinned for that's whar he belonged to [be?]."



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As her Grandpa Marshall finished his [?], Eddie Mercedes, aged 17, dressed in overalls, comes in from picking strawberries in the [Wadsworth?] field across the [road?]. She bounds past me into the kitchen and rattles the kettles on the kitchen stove as she samples the cooking food. This makes her grandmother laugh.

When she comes out again, she gives me a friendly greeting and tells me that as soon [as?] the berry season is over she is going to return to her studies at school. [She?] sells tickets at the local colored theater in the evenings.

Her next gesture is an invitation to visit the Wadesworth [packing?] house across the field from where she works. I accept the invitation, adding that I've never been in a strawberry packing house. The packing house proves to be the [?] building I had seen across the field from the Marshall porch.

When we enter the barn-like structure I notice the number of woman employed. They are busy [grading?] and packing the berries as they are brought from the field.

In the middle of the room is a long table with wire stretched over it. Clean [granary?] sacks are spread over the wire. After the berries are washed 10 in a tub of water they are dipped up in perforated tin vessels and dropped on the granary sacks. Excess water is absorbed by the sacks and drips through the sand covered floor.

The average strawberry box contains about 75 berries, all according to variations in the size of the berry itself. When a create is packed it holds 36 pints.

The pickers use quart boxes when picking berries. They earn three] cents for every box. Some told me that they can pick from 25 to 60 boxes per day. A picker averages from \$7.00 to \$9.00 a week. As each box is finished the field foreman gives them a stub of paper with a number on it. These papers are counted when the picker is paid. A carrier

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transports the boxes from the field to the packing house in a long crate that holds 12 quarts.

Like Eddie, most of the young girls wear overalls while working the fields. She says: We gits eight cents or more at the market for our berries, and a crate brings aroun three dollar now. They begins settin out the berry plants in September, and the pickin starts long about December.

“Wet weather and birds is the biggest troubles we has.” Outside I notice a small boy and an old man walking diligently around the field on opposite sides. The man carries a high powered rifle and the boy an air rifle. Eddie explains that it is their job to keep the birds away from the field. As we walk down the steps I notice four dead robins lying there, and hear a woman say that she intends taking them home to eat.

As Eddie and I walk back to E. J's across the open field, I recall some information in my possession concerning the settlement of [Cork?].

At one time State highway bordered the settlement. The town bore the Indian name of [?], or [?] for short. In the Seminole 11 language this [meant?] “Indian Pipe.” About fifty years ago the post office authorities had difficulty spelling these names and recommended that the office be moved to Sweet's millpond. this was accomplished and the town renamed Cork. they later moved the settlement to plant city when the railroad come to that section. Today it is a suburb of Plant city, a flourishing agricultural center, noted for its strawberries. Records show shipments of 20,000,000 pints each season.

With a population of 8,000 persons, half are Negroes. The latter play a conspicuous part in tilling and working the vast [tracts?] of land under cultivation. This includes truck [in ?] and citrus growing.

During the berry season, which lasts from December through April, the town is a busy place. The schools are closed so that the children may help in the fields. Pickers range in

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age from 6 to 65 and sometimes older. Trucks loaded with [human?] cargo are continually going to and from the fields, other trucks are engaged in transporting the berries to market.

The market, constructed by WPA, is another interesting site. A large place built in downtown Cork, it is where refrigerated trucks wait in line to take their consignments north.

When we arrive at E.J's, he is sitting on the porch biting on the stem of his pipe.

I tell him that I like it and that it is all very interesting.

"Now, you see," he says, "this is all I do, when I ain't workin in my own garden spot. I kin see for miles aroun [yere?] by jest sitting right here on my front porch. I kin see my [son?] workin, an keep tabs on everting they's doin. When I walks aroun and checks the crops, them's the days when I works. When I rest I'm doin this or I'se readin all them papers you see on the 12 table yonder. They keeps me company. Mattie, she reads a lot too."

E. J. stops then and looks his watch: "Lawsy me! It's three fifteen, I gotta be gittin in me garden, I got some corn to plant. How bout you comin along for a time ifen you ain't got no more to do." He picked up the bag of corn on the porch and walked down the steps, I followed him. He went the car shed where ge got a hoe, then we goth walked toward the garden in the rear of the house.

"This yere is a piece of lan I gardens when I doen feel like goin to the fields," he told me. "I makes lots of stuff on the piece of lan, it's rich. I gotta get some more corn to feed my mule [Beck?] too.

"Sometimes I ketch ole Becky and shows them fool boys aroun yere how to plow. I was trained to plow when I was a boy about 16. My pa had aroun 60 acres on his last place. And you think we didn't larn how to plow! I can show any of them how it's done. I am one of God's men, and when yor a man who God has laid his hands on, beware!

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"It's plum hard for a man to make airy profit ofen a farm now. This yere ware what's comin might make things a little better. You know[!?] If that war comes we won't be ready for them furriners, cause we wasn't prepared for them last time it come. But they jest keep on lettin them people fool them with their promises. They talks peace and at the same time gits theirselves ready to fout. But we'uns is such good hearted folks, we jest takes it all in.

"Of course I believes in foutin, but the way to do it, is to bare yor knuckles and hit them square like they done in olden times. Back in them days it was ever man for hisself an fout, or else..."

As E.J. talks he walks up and down his garden digging and dropping a 13 grain of corn every two feet. He has tied a small white bag of corn to his belt straps, and it using this for seed.

This yere is Yeller Ouben Flint Corn," he says "sometimes they calls it Weevil Resistance Corn. The reason for this is, it doan attract them weevils like the other corn do. this yere kind grows some seven foot tall."

E. J. falls silent after this last bit of information, and he walks along the rows, making a hole with his hoe, then dropping a grain of corn, making a hole and [md]

His next remark is one of meaning:[md]

"You know[:?] You fine lots of hard workers aroun you if they happens to live next to a man what's thrifty. If it warn't for a thrifty fellow among them's what lazy, they'd all be lazy too, but as it is, they gits thrifty as the result. Now you take that there mule of mine, yes sir: She gits me up at dawn ever time, as shore as you is borned. How she do's it is, she jest bray and bray until I gits out to tend her, that's all. So then I'se thrifty cause then I up early, and that makes other folks thrifty around me.

"Oncet I had a colt what brayed in the middle of the night. She'd bray until I called out to her, then she'd shut her mouth. You know, she brayed jest like a person wantin me to call to her, then when I did she knowed my voice, so she shushed. It's somethin the way they gits to recognize yor voice, but they do, jest like folks what talks over the telephone a lot. I useter talk over the telephone when I was livin in Tamper, it was when I was line fixin. I'd call in, and the operator would say, "is that you Marshall?" and I'd tell her yes, but she always knowed my voice. Well that's the same way animals is.

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"Another thing I always kept in my crow, was this. When i seed a feller worryin hisself plum to death, I jest think, I batcher ifen he would git hisself a lot of hard work to do, he would'nt have no time to be such a fool.

"[Man?]? We's livin in a great ole worle, it's jest like this [game?] down yere what we sells the belite, always a gamble. Folks fusses a lot about us'ums playin it, but it ain't so bad. I would rather play that, then be walkin along the street and see someone drop a ten dollar bill, then I comes along and pick it up and net give it back to him. The bolite is like bread east upon the water, it do come back sometime or other.

"All in all though, this yere little town what I live in is purty good, in fact it's a exception. The niggers is all treated better than in the average town of the South. Boy I'm happy to tell you that too. Anyways a good nigger is a better class nigger, and I always feels he should be put in a class to hisself. A cracker man oncet tole me he didn't believe all niggers was [alike?] anyways. But give a nigger a [chancst?], let him fix hisself up to appear bettern than the ones across him, and the better class of white folks appreciates us.

"One white man tole me one time, right before a bunch of niggers[:?] I was youn then and it shore made me feel good. 'You never see Marshall without no necktie on. Now I can't do that, cause I spiles too many.' Well even that showed that I was somethin anyway.

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"I has lots of confidence in what a lot of white man's tell me. You take this here Swift man what you seen me doin bizness with awhile age. he's one of them there rawbone cracker man, and they's fine. You've really got somethin when you get one of them on yer side, for if there's any footin to be did, you [doan?] hafter to do it, they does it for you.

"He is talkin about promotin me now. But you know some time a promotion 15 cause aspiration, and gives you a feelin that a little less job gives more satisfaction without so much responsibility."

When I leave him to return to Plant City, he calls after me. When you come down agin, be shore and come aroun to see me. And you is always welcome to whatever I got, exceptin my money, and a poor man ain't got no money from which he can depart.

As I drive through the other part of the colored section, I notice strawberries planted on every available spot. A few collard greens and other vegetables grow here and there. Everywhere the streets are here, everyone has gone to the fields.

Aside from one thickly settled area the community is scattered. Farms are owned by the Negroes, or lensed from overseers. Negro labor is [predominote?].

I see a few of the old an dilapidated tenant houses E. J. has in his charge. There is no electricity in any of them and water is handpumped.

One tenant says: We is able to rake a livin on over five acre tract, to live and rake up the slack by obtaining odd jobs during the off seasons.